



REPRESENTATION OF WADA CULTURE IN THE PLAY OLD STONE MANSION BY MAHESH ELKUNCHWAR

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ABSTRACT

Mahesh Elkunchwar's name is synonymous with the great tradition of playwriting in India. His name is often invoked in the same breath as that of playwrights like Vijay Tendulkar, Satish Alekar and Mahesh Dattani. His plays deal with the sense of tradition that is so deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. His play 'Old Stone Mansion' has a very successful run and is regarded as a canonical text of Marathi literature. The objective of this paper is to present the declining Wada Culture and its impact on life and theatre.

KEYWORDS: Declining, Aristocratic, Patriarchy, Gender, Family

INTRODUCTION

Mahesh Elkunchwar has always been self-critical. It made him stop writing for eight years. Elkunchwar has drawn more from personal experience, and small-town culture. His short plays like "Reflection" and "Flower of Blood" strike hard. His best-known work is *The Wada Trilogy* (Seagull, 2004), starting with the classic "Old Stone Mansion". Elkunchwar has been influenced by Western playwrights and theatres, such as Anton Chekhov, Sartre, Eugene Ionesco, Antonio Artaud and Samuel Beckett. The philosophy of existentialism and absurdism is embedded in the writings of Mahesh Elkunchwar. He has lived and worked in Nagpur. Nagpur is away from the centre of Marathi Theatre in Pune and Mumbai. Maybe it is this perspective of an "outsider" that enables his plays to work not just as good theatre but as powerful social commentary as well. Paradoxically Alekar achieves the same by being an "insider". Mahesh Elkunchwar writes and also acts in his plays sometimes. His range is remarkable. And the myriad issues that have taken him up are extremely inspiring.

The play *Old Stone Mansion* presents the issues of the Wada community in a way to help the reader relate to those issues even when he/she is located in a different culture. The term "Wada" refers to the entire culture/tradition of the old, declining feudal structure of a region in Maharashtra. It is a Marathi word which refers to a group of houses together where people live together in joint families. They share the Wada. 'Wada Trilogy' comprises three plays in sequential order: *Old Stone Mansion* (Wada Cheribundi), *The Pond* (Magma Talyakathi) and *Apocalypse* (Yugant).

Old Stone Mansion is a product of the large joint family with its hierarchic patriarchy. This patriarchal system holds the tensions in check under a facile pretence of patriarchal authority. When Elkunchwar wrote Wada he was through many problems. He knows how to cope with certain situations, he began to understand other people when he began to look into himself.

In an interview, Elkunchwar says:

And Wada is a way of a very personal kind of experience, because I come from such a family, although my family has never fallen on bad days, because my father was a very sensible person, and made sure everyone was educated... But since the Land ceiling Act 1949, I have seen feudal families crumbling under the pressure.

Three years of Mahesh Elkunchwar's life were spent in a place called 'Wani' where a lot of rich families lived. They were all Brahmins. There were about twenty or twenty-five families. It was a place known for its rich people. And Mahesh Elkunchwar could see their state of decay. Those families are still there, and all of them have fallen on bad days. And Mahesh Elkunchwar could see why it was happening. They had lost the work habit centuries ago. They had never worked on their lives.

The basic issues dealt with in the trilogy are that of rural/urban division, migration and disintegration of the family of Deshpande (belonging to the Wada community) and how these social and cultural metaphors are used and employed by the dramatist to comment upon the realities of not just the region but the entire Indian community as a whole.

It is very interesting to find that both playwrights Chekhov and Elkunchwar have autobiographical elements in their plays. Several experiences in Chekhov's own life are said to have directly inspired his writing of "The Cherry Orchard." When

Chekhov was sixteen, his mother went into debt after having been cheated by some builders she had hired to construct a small house. A former lodger, Gabriel Selivanov, offered to help her financially. However, he secretly bought the house for himself.

At approximately the same time. His childhood home in Taganrog was sold to pay off its mortgage. These financial and domestic upheavals imprinted themselves on his memory greatly and would reappear in the action of "The Cherry Orchard". Chekhov also touches on the theme of the decadence of Russian feudal society in "The Cherry Orchard". It focuses on the tensions of changing times. On another level, the play centres on the complications with major changes in contemporary Russian society - the freedom of the serfs and the decaying power of the aristocracy are two more general aspects of Russian history that the play deals with.

Elkunchwar had already left behind his obsession with the 'absurdity' of existence imperilled by the inroads of repressed sexuality and secret violence. When Elkunchwar began to write *Old Stone Mansion*, He found himself going out of himself, looking at the world with sympathy. He observed the process of social collapse which is the fate of aristocratic families. In "Old Stone Mansion", he takes a close look at one of those families still struggling against time in some small town or village. The elderly men are lazy drones, the elder women are the patient upholders and preservers of the orthodox system, and the younger men of the generations are as subservient as the women in their submission to authority. It is only the new generation that bristles in several variations of rebellion ranging from bitter cynicism to escape to irresponsibility. It is in a way a kind of surrender to commercialism or careerism to total disaffiliation. Elkunchwar takes great care to chart out the positions and roles. He rules out of this great battle that is acted out against a history that drives the Brahmin gentry into bankruptcy.

It is the family of the average present-day village commuter. Its specific identification, however, makes it the archetype of all families at all times. It becomes every family. All the images are blended in responsibility. There has to be a crisis to revive the loosening ties within the family. One of the several linking devices used by Mahesh Elkunchwar is the disintegration of relationships within the Deshpande family. In the first part of "The Old Stone Mansion" the scattered family comes together for the funeral of their father, Venkatesh. However, they end up fighting over who should get how much share in the family from the 'wada' that has been left behind by the deceased. No member is ready to spend on the post-funeral rites.

Vahini says that everyone should share the cost. She says that he was everybody's father. She further says that it was not the individual responsibility to keep up the Deshpande family name all alone. The mother or Aai as she is known as a witness to all bickering that goes on in the house about who would take charge of the post-funeral expenses of her husband. A compromise is reached when she decides to sell her share of WADA to meet the expenses.

She says that she is aware of what is going on. She further says that things were different when he was alive.

She can see the old Wada crumbling. The collapse of Wada would collapse an entire network of relationships and an entire culture of living together in a community. Indian audiences can immediately relate to fights that go on in many families where everyone wants to get out of responsibility and just grab his or her

share of land and money. One must be able to relate to the disparities of a family deeply rooted in a region. Such discrepancies carry meaning for the audience which is beyond the WADA cultural traditions. However in the play 'The Cherry Orchard' not only do characters' class and social differences come out, but the way in which they interact in various moments emphasizes both the extreme differences between their personalities and the similarities. Paradoxically, it is these exaggerated distinctions between these characters that create an awareness of some quality which unites them all. The characters in the play 'Old Stone Mansion' are all remarkably distinct from one another on an individual level but in a greater sense, they are similar because they all possess a tendency towards excess.

The play's finely drawn character sketches are informed by Mahesh Elkunchwar's own experiences of growing up in a Wada (or mansion) in the village of Parwa. In an interview published in the 2004 edition of the Wada trilogy, Mahesh Elkunchwar says that he always feels like an outsider in this milieu. This distance allows Mahesh Elkunchwar to write about the Deshpandes with remarkable scientific precision. The playwright is often strongly critical of the Deshpande family. Elkunchwar portrays the characters of Sudhir and Anjali who live in Bombay under spiritual traumas. This is typical of every village in India. They hide in hypocrisy in towns and cities. However, when they come to the village, they want to be recognized as rich people. However, they have nothing to eat. Mahesh Elkunchwar deals with the issue of family crisis – a crisis of traditional culture against commercial or consumer culture. He says that Wada is not a simple family drama, It is more than that. It is a document of social change. It is a document of political change."

The play deals with the disintegration of traditional joint family, and village life under the onslaught of the modern force of urbanization. Wada shows the deterioration of the typical aristocratic family of Deshpande in thirty years. The play presents women as victims of caste bias and a patriarchal mindset. However, on the other hand, the play also presents women as agents of change.

Prabha is the sister of the three brothers-Bhasker, Sudhir and Chandu. She reflects a case where the woman is made a senseless and useless impediment to the traditional family. She is not allowed to go to college. Prabha is an extremely intelligent girl. She is prepared to continue her studies. However, she is not allowed to do so.

Sudhir, in the play, is often the voice of reason. He chastises Bhaskar who, though too poor to pay his grocery bill, decides to feed the entire village as part of their father's death rituals.

Even though families like the Deshpandes are on their last legs, 'Wada Chirebandi' is an important play. This is because it deals with the orthodox tradition that is so deeply rooted in the Indian psyche. His version of the play questions the cohesiveness of a joint family by telling the story from the point of view of the "outsiders". Characters are forced to leave the family at various points.

Mahesh Elkunchwar's celebrated play " Wada Chirebandi "reminds one of Ramsha Lokapur's "Taayi Saaheba". Both the play and the novel record the decline and disintegration of the huge wadas 'as well as the smothering of Brahmin families that lived in villages in post-independent India. The play also juxtaposes the emotions of people.

The distance between Vidarbha village where the play takes place and Bombay where the films are made shows the distance between declining feudalism and megalopolis. In the play, the part of the family that has settled in Bombay lives a hard life. A typical lower-middle-class life in a cramped two-room flat. However, in the village they represent prosperity.

Conclusion

To sum up, the play 'Old Stone Mansion ' projects the life of a family living in Maharashtra. It describes realistically the age-old Wada Culture carried out by the dominant Brahmin communities in India. The play explores greed, hypocrisy and orthodox views of the family members. However, the family dispute doesn't set them apart from each other. They maintain love and affection for each other and don't keep resentment for long.

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